

Remarks on Disaster Assistance in Los Angeles, California February 28, 1998

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'd like to begin by thanking Congressman Gallegly, Congresswoman Millender-McDonald, Congressman Sherman, and Gloria Molina and Zev Yaroslavsky for joining me here.

I have just met with some of the people who were hurt by the terrible weather you've had in southern California over the last week, as well as a number of the people who were involved in the rescue effort. Let me begin by saying that our hearts and prayers are with the families who lost their loved ones. I especially want to send our condolences to the families of Officer Rick Stovall and Officer Brit Irvine who gave their lives in the line of service as they responded to the emergency in Santa Maria.

There were many people of all ages who lost their lives in this terrible tragedy. I received a fax from a friend of mine yesterday whose son lost a childhood friend of his, a young fellow student. I met a young woman in there in the meeting who lost her fiance after he had saved the lives of a woman and her three young children.

There is very little that anyone can say at this moment to ease the human loss. We do know that the weather we are experiencing now has been dramatically aggravated because of El Nino. I have visited with families in Florida where 39 people were killed in the worst tornadoes in 50 years, in northern California, and now here today.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has spent a lot of time in southern California in the last 5 years and couple of months since

I've been President. I talked with James Lee Witt in some detail before I came down here today. We are determined to do all we can. FEMA is responding swiftly to provide disaster relief funds in 35 counties, including over \$2 million more for Glenn County. The SBA has an outreach office in Orange County, and Federal Highway Administration personnel have already released \$40 million to California for road repairs.

There will be a lot more to be done. The Members of Congress and the local officials have talked to me about other things that we need to do to deal with the particular problems of people who lost everything or who are still at risk of further natural calamities.

Let me just say today, I want more than anything else to praise the courage of those who worked so hard during this disaster—the fire, the police personnel, the emergency personnel, all the others who were involved; many of them risked their lives, and as we know, two lost their lives—and to praise the courage of the people who have lost everything they have but still have their lives. I want to encourage them, to tell them their fellow Americans are thinking about them, and to pray for tranquil weather as we begin the rebuilding process.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:05 p.m. on the tarmac at Los Angeles International Airport. In his remarks, he referred to Gloria Molina and Zev Yaroslavsky, members, Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors; and California Highway Patrol officers Rick Stovall and Brit Irvine.

Remarks at a Dinner for Senator Barbara Boxer in Los Angeles February 28, 1998

Thank you very, very much. First I want to thank all of you for being here for Senator Boxer and for your country. Thank you, Senator Torricelli, not only for being here and for your leadership on behalf of your fellow Democrats in the Senate and some of the people we hope

will be joining us, but for always being willing to stand up and fight for what you believe in and not just standing—[*applause*—]thank you. The longer I stay in Washington, the more I come to appreciate people who will stand up and fight. And I thank you, Senator. [*Laughter*]

I want to thank Ron and Jan for having us here. I don't believe, if I live to be 100, I don't believe I'd ever get tired of coming to this magnificent place. I'm sure they would get tired of me coming—[laughter]—and are doubtless glad that I am term-limited, but I love coming here.

I want to say just a couple of things tonight—and I've already eliminated all the stories I was going to tell, because all the entertainers will be downgrading me if I tell a joke. Whoopi told me a funny story once; I think it's the funniest joke I ever heard, but I certainly can't tell that. [Laughter] It's not that bad, it's just too bad for me to tell in front of all of you, but it's really funny. If you file by the front table on your way out, she'll be glad to—[laughter]. That's the best I could do.

Hillary and Chelsea actually wanted to be here tonight. We love Barbara Boxer, and she is now a member of our family, or we are a member of her family, or however it works, but anyway, we're all here together. And that's one of the reasons I came. But there are a couple of other reasons I wanted to talk about.

I asked, when I came in, I asked Sim to talk to me about the race and Barbara to talk to me about the race, and they said one of the members of the Republican Party who wishes to oppose Senator Boxer had already spent almost \$6 million on television ads and that a lot of these television ads are trying to convince the California voters that she has not been a good Senator. Now, you be the judge.

When I introduced the bill in 1993 that reduced the deficit 92 percent before—before—a single dollar had been taken out from the balanced budget bill last year, we didn't have a vote to spare in the Senate—not a single one. Al Gore had to vote for it; it was a tie vote. And as he says, whenever he votes, we win. [Laughter]

You know, being President has had all kinds of humbling experiences. [Laughter] And I'm sure you all have your top-10 list. But if anybody had ever told me 5 years ago I'd wind up being a straight man for Al Gore, I never would have believed that. Such are the burdens of office. [Laughter]

Anyway, we didn't have a vote to spare—one vote. California—you know what it was like in 1992, 1991, 1993. Barbara Boxer voted yes knowing she had a difficult campaign, knowing it would be easier to walk away from, knowing

that they'd be pounding the drums and saying all kind of terrible things. Five years later, we're on the verge of the first balanced budget in 30 years. The stock market went from 3,200 to over 8,000. We've got the lowest unemployment rate in 24 years, the lowest crime rate in 24 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 30 years, the lowest inflation in 30 years, the highest homeownership in history. I think that's a pretty good record.

I don't believe that \$6 million in negative television ads, or \$60 million, or \$600 million should be allowed to wipe away that fundamental truth. That one vote—that one vote—should get her the support of a huge majority of the people of California for reelection to the United States Senate. It's that important.

But that's not all that happened. We also—you heard Senator Boxer talking about the decline in the crime rate now—we put more community police on the street. We were ridiculed for that bill by people like the folks that are advertising against her—ridiculed. Why? Because we also said, "Okay, we'll put more police on the street and put them back on the beat, but we think we should take assault weapons off the street and we ought to spend some money to give kids something positive to do so that they have something to say yes to in life." And we were ridiculed. They said, "Oh, this bill will be a failure; it's pork barrel; it's terrible"; and besides that, we're "trying to take everybody's guns away from them." Well, 5 years later the Brady law has kept over 300,000 people with criminal records from getting handguns. I don't know how many people are alive because of it, but a lot of people. And juvenile crime is going down again, and it's going down most in the communities where the kids are being dealt with as people and being given a positive future. So I think that's enough to justify reelecting Senator Boxer.

And I could give you lots of other examples. I also believe you can just see, watch her standing up here—and she has to stand on this box that then they have to move away for me. But don't kid yourself, it's just a prop. [Laughter] It's designed to disarm the enemy. [Laughter] She's a very large person—a very large person. [Laughter]

Washington is a place where too many people take themselves too seriously, where a lot of people profess to be profoundly religious but

actually worship power, and where having a person who shows up every day more interested in people and interested in power as an instrument of doing good, not as an end in itself, is a very precious commodity. For that reason, Barbara Boxer should be reelected to the United States Senate.

And finally let me say, as I said in the State of the Union Address, Hillary had this idea that we ought to honor the passing of the century and the coming of a new millennium with a set of gifts that she sort of—she gave me this idea, she said we ought to call it “Remembering the past, and imagining the future.” And Barbara Boxer has a good imagination, and she thinks about her children and her grandchildren and the world we want to leave to them. And when the world is changing as fast as it is now, it’s really actually rather difficult to predict what is going to happen next month, and it’s difficult to know with absolute precision what’s going to happen 30 years from now. But we know what challenges we have to face if we want the world to be a positive place 30 years from now.

So all those things that Senator Torricelli talked about—the efforts that we can now make because we do have a strong economy, because we do have budgetary discipline, because things are going well, we can now make an effort we need to imagine that future and to make it come true. That’s what the education and the child care and the health care initiative is about; that’s what the environmental initiatives are about. I don’t think people will be making fun of us much longer when we talk about climate change and global warming. You look at what El Nino has done this year in America, in southern California; can you imagine what can happen to our climate if the average temperature over the next 50 years went up another couple of degrees? People ask you what global warming is about—it’s about that hole in the interstate here. It’s about mud rushing down and carrying away the lives of innocent people. It’s about malaria rising to the highest known altitudes on other continents and people carrying infections into airports and giving it to other people so now there’s a phenomenon called “airport malaria.”

We like to believe that technology and intelligence and everything just defies all the laws of gravity and nature; it’s just not so. The good Lord has a way of bringing us back to Earth,

and we must return to Earth on this. We’ve got to meet our responsibilities to future generations. We do not have to give up economic prosperity. Every time we faced an environmental challenge in this country for the last 30 years, when we’ve been working on it seriously, every single time people say, well, if you do this you’ll hurt the economy; if you do that it will cost you jobs; if you do the other thing, you’ll set everybody back and people won’t be able to make a good living. It’s been wrong every time; it is wrong now. We will find a way to find greater prosperity if we honor our obligations not only to preserve but actually to restore the planet and reverse this process of climate change that I believe is very destructive. And I hope you will support it.

So there is a lot of stuff to do. We want to establish a medical research fund that will double funding for the National Cancer Institute, dramatically increase funding for the National Institutes of Health, increase overall scientific research spending, establish a space station in the sky that I think is very, very important for what happens here on Earth. And all of that is great and important, and all these issues I hope will be out there. But remember the second half of what we’re trying to do for the millennium. We’re trying to imagine the future, but also remember and honor the past.

And I would just close with this, because it really does matter who these Senators are, what their values are, what kind of memory they have, how they look at the world. They have enormous influence. And, yes, I want to do all these specific things I said. But all these specific things that we should do have to be seen against the background of our progress as a nation from the beginning into the future for, I hope, as long as human beings exist on this planet.

That’s why we want to preserve the Star-Spangled Banner. Believe it or not, we need \$13 million to save the flag that led to our national anthem. We’ve got a lot of work to do just to save the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights and the Constitution. And it’s worth doing. There’s a house where Abraham Lincoln and his family used to spend the summer, by the Old Soldiers’ Home in Washington, DC—this little cabin, it’s just about to go to pieces—we ought to save that. People pay a big price when they forget where they came from. And here in this county, there are parts of your past I hope you will find a way

to save as a part of celebrating a new millennium.

But if you go back through American history and you say, what were we all about when we started—at least what did we say we believed, and where did we fall short, and how do we do better; what was the Civil War about, where did we fall short, and how do we do better; when all these people quit working on the farm and moved to the cities, and all these immigrants came to America around the turn of the century and started working in the factories, were we falling short of our ideals, and how do we do better? What happened in the Depression; what happened in World War II; what happened in the civil rights movement; how did we fall short, and how do we do better? You look at all of it, and think about—just go home tonight and think about this: Why did people come here in the first place? They wanted to get away from arbitrary, abusive, unaccountable power, to be free—remember the Declaration of Independence—to pursue happiness, and to form a more perfect Union so their children could do an even better job of being free to pursue happiness, to form a more perfect Union. Go back and read it; that's what it says.

Now, did we live that way? Of course not. You had to be a white male property owner to have any influence in the beginning. And given my family's history, that means that I wouldn't have been much better off than Whoopi, because we wouldn't have had any property. No, we weren't there. But it was the right idea. Freedom is better than oppression. Freedom, what? Not to have a guaranteed outcome but pursue your own dream, and to form a more perfect Union so your children after you will do even better, not just materially but spiritually as well. That was the idea. You go back and think about every single turning point in the whole history of this country, and you will see that we had to ask ourselves the same old questions: How can we deepen the meaning

of our freedom; how can we widen the circle of opportunity; how can we form a more perfect Union?

I've had the chance to say many times now in the last several months; I want to say it one more time: The Republican Party represented the dominant party in America for deepening the meaning of our freedom, broadening the circle of opportunity, and forming a more perfect Union from the time Abraham Lincoln laid down his life to save this country until Theodore Roosevelt served as President. But from the time of Woodrow Wilson through Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman and John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter down to the present day, we have not always been right, we Democrats, but we have always been on the right side of those three great issues in the 20th century.

If you think about all of these great challenges we face and you listen to the rhetoric and you listen to the arguments that are made, strip it all away and take every single issue, and go home tonight and look at your kids, think about your grandkids or your nieces and nephews or all the people you care about, and ask yourself, "What should I do as a citizen to deepen the meaning of freedom in my country, to widen the circle of opportunity so it embraces everybody, to give us a chance with all this diversity—this brilliant, blazing, confusing, complex diversity—to form a more perfect Union" there may be more than one answer. But surely one answer is electing the people to public office like Barbara Boxer.

Thank you, and God bless you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:15 p.m. at a private residence. In his remarks, he referred to dinner hosts Ron and Janet Burkle; comedienne Whoopi Goldberg; and Sim Farar, finance chair for Senator Boxer's reelection campaign committee.